

AJC: Even pupils who live near school unlikely to walk

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Fewer than half of American children who live close to school regularly walk or ride a bike to classes, according to a new study that highlights a dramatic shift toward car commuting by kids.

Children in the South did the least hoofing and pedaling, partly because of safety concerns, experts believe.

The issue is important because it's linked to escalating rates of childhood obesity, said Sarah Martin, the study's lead author.

"Kids need to take advantage of the opportunities that do exist for physical activity," said Martin, a Maine-based evaluation consultant and former researcher with the Atlanta-based U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The article is being published in the August issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. Martin did the research when she was at the CDC.

Other studies have found that relatively few kids walk or bike to school.

The numbers have dropped as the population has grown while the number of schools has declined and the distance to get to them has lengthened for many families.

In 1969, about 90 percent of kids who lived within a mile of school walked or rode bikes to get there.

In 2004, just 48 percent did that at least one day a week, the new study found.

Separately, federal statistics suggest the numbers are worse, of course, for children who live farther from school. In 1969, 42 percent walked or cycled and in 2001 (the most recent data available for that group), just 16 percent did.

Generally, studies have found that less educated families exercise less and have higher rates of obesity. But Martin's survey found that the children of well-educated parents were more likely to get a ride to school. She said in those families, both parents are likely to have jobs and may believe it's safer and more expedient for one of them to drive their child to school on their way to work.

Research also has shown that the South has the lowest levels of exercise and adult activity. "They don't view walking to school as very important," Martin said.

Associated Press KIDS' COMMUTE More than a third of children live within a mile of their schools in the U.S., yet only half of them bike or walk to school. Children age 9 to 15 living less than one mile from school*: 34.7% Of those, walking or biking to school: Overall: 47.9% Living in urban areas: 67.4 Rural areas: 38.4 Whose household income is: \$25,000 or less: 56.7 More than 75,000: 39.6 *Study data from 2004. Source: American Journal of Preventive Medicine